

Message Text

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SUBJ: THE "ALTERNATIVES CANADA" CONFERENCE, NEW VIEWS ON
CANADIAN CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

1. SUMMARY: WELL KNOWN CANADIANS FROM ALL PARTS OF CANADA INCLUDING THE PREMIERS OF ALBERTA, NOVA SCOTIA, PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND AND SASKATCHEWAN CAME TOGETHER IN BANFF MARCH 27-29 TO PARTICIPATE IN AN "ALTERNATIVES CANADA" CONFERENCE, A FORUM FOR WIDE RANGING DISCUSSION OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES NEEDED TO MAINTAIN CANADIAN CONFEDERATION. THREE CENTRAL THEMES WERE PUT FORWARD: (A) DEVOLUTION -- A DIRECT TRANSFER OF POWER FROM THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO THE PROVINCES; (B) "EXECUTIVE FEDERALISM" -- I.E., ENSHRINEMENT OF THE FIRST MINISTERS CONFERENCE AS THE MECHANISM FOR RESOLUTION OF FEDERAL-PROVINCIAL POLICY ISSUES; AND (C) THE RECONSTITUTION OF THE CANADIAN SENATE AS THE VOICE OF THE PROVINCES. MANY DELEGATES CALLED FOR GREATER PROVINCIAL PARTICIPATION IN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS INCLUDING A PROVINCIAL SAY IN THE DECISIONS OF THE MAJOR REGULATORY BODIES. A CONSENSUS HELD THAT THERE WAS NEED FOR SENATE REFORM TO PROVIDE FOR MORE REGIONAL INPUT BUT DELEGATES DIFFERED WIDELY AS TO HOW SENATORS SHOULD BE

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SELECTED. END SUMMARY.

2. THE CANADA WEST FOUNDATION, AN INDEPENDENT, NON-PROFIT RESEARCH GROUP FORMED IN 1973 TO STUDY ISSUES OF WESTERN CONCERN, SPONSORED A MAJOR THREE DAY CONFERENCE, "ALTERNATIVES CANADA", IN BANFF MARCH 27-29 TO EXAMINE CANADA'S FUTURE WITH FOCUS ON REVISING FEDERAL-PROVINCIAL RELATIONSHIPS TO ACCOMMODATE REGIONAL INTERESTS. PRINCIPAL WORKING

DOCUMENT FOR THE "ALTERNATIVES CANADA" CONFERENCE CALLED FOR CHANGES IN ALMOST EVERY CANADIAN INSTITUTION INCLUDING THE OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE PARLIAMENT, AND THE COURTS, BUT DEBATE, BY AND LARGE, CENTERED ON PROPOSALS TO SCRAP THE CANADIAN SENATE AND ESTABLISH A 108-SEAT HOUSE OF PROVINCES WITH BROAD LEGISLATIVE POWERS AND A MEMBERSHIP APPOINTED BY PROVINCIAL PREMIERS FROM AMONG THE RANKS OF PROVINCIAL MINISTERS AND HIGH LEVEL CIVIL SERVANTS.

3. ALBERTA PREMIER LOUGHEED TOLD THE CONFERENCE THAT HE REJECTED THE IDEA OF REPLACING THE SENATE WITH A HOUSE OF PROVINCES. HE CONTENDED THAT THIS CHANGE WOULD ALLOW OTTAWA TO WITHDRAW FROM THE OPEN GIVE-AND-TAKE OF FEDERAL-PROVINCIAL MEETINGS AND PERMIT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO ESCAPE DIRECT ACCOUNTABILITY FOR ITS ACTIONS. MUCH TO THE DELEGATES SURPRISE, LOUGHEED PROCLAIMED THE EXISTENCE OF A "VERY EFFECTIVE SYSTEM" OF FEDERAL PROVINCIAL CONSULTATION; HE ASSERTED THAT FEDERAL PROVINCIAL CONFERENCES WERE ALREADY A "NEW INSTITUTION" IN CANADIAN POLITICAL LIFE. SASKATCHEWAN PREMIER ALLAN BLAKENEY SUPPORTED THE CREATION OF A HOUSE OF PROVINCES TO HELP RESOLVE REGIONAL DIFFERENCES AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL, BUT HE WARNED CONFERENCE DELEGATES THAT THE PROPOSED NEW UPPER HOUSE WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO DISPOSE OF REGIONAL ASPIRATIONS (I.E., QUEBEC SEPARATISM). FLORA MACDONALD CALLED FOR A CHANGE IN THE MAKE UP OF THE SENATE, AND HARSHLY CRITICIZED "THE COSTLY AND GROWING NETWORK OF FEDERAL-PROVINCIAL NEGOTIATIONS" WHICH THREATENED TO REPLACE

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PARLIAMENT AS THE SEAT OF GOVERNMENT IN CANADA. BY CONTRAST, TRANSPORT MINISTER OTTO LANG TOLD DELEGATES ABOUT THE "DIVERSE AND SERIOUS DIFFICULTIES" WHICH WERE INHERENT IN PROPOSALS FOR CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE AND URGED OVERALL CAUTION.

4. LOUGHEED PROPOSED THAT PROVINCES APPOINT 40 PERCENT OF THE MEMBERS OF MAJOR REGULATORY AGENCIES SUCH AS THE CANADIAN WHEAT BOARD, NATIONAL ENERGY BOARD AND CANADIAN TRANSPORT COMMISSION. NOVA SCOTIA PREMIER REGAN SUPPORTED THE CONCEPT OF GIVING THE PROVINCES A VOICE IN THE POLICIES OF FEDERAL REGULATORY BOARDS WHILE PREMIER ALEX CAMPBELL OF PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND FAVORED MORE EFFECTIVE REGIONAL REPRESENTATION ON SUCH AGENCIES AS AIR CANADA AND THE BANK OF CANADA. FLORA MACDONALD ALSO ADVOCATED A PROVINCIAL ROLE IN APPOINTMENTS TO MAJOR GOVERNMENT REGULATORY BODIES.

5. QUEBEC SEPARATION WAS ANOTHER MAJOR AREA OF DELEGATE CONCERN. PREMIER BLAKENEY CALLED FOR UNDERSTANDING OF FRENCH CANADIANS AND URGED CONSIDERATION OF A THIRD OPTION, SOMETHING BETWEEN SEPARATION AND THE PRESENT STATUS QUO. LOUGHEED SPECIFICALLY REJECTED SOVEREIGNTY ASSOCIATION AND SPECIAL STATUS FOR QUEBEC BUT HE MADE AN EFFECTIVE AND EMOTIONAL STATEMENT ABOUT THE DESIRE OF CANADIANS TO RETAIN QUEBEC IN CONFEDERATION AND LEFT DOOR CLEARLY OPEN FOR

DELEGATION OF SPECIAL POWERS TO INDIVIDUAL PROVINCES TO MEET UNIQUE NEEDS (SUCH AS LANGUAGE RIGHTS). LANG SAID DELEGATES SHOULD SHOW A WILLINGNESS TO GO SLOW IN MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF QUEBEC.

6. COMMENT: THE OBJECTIVES OF THE CONFERENCE ORGANIZERS APPEAR TO HAVE BEEN WELL SERVED IN THAT WESTERN POLITICAL CONCERNS RECEIVED NATIONWIDE ATTENTION. ALBERTA PREMIER LOUGHEED USED THE CONFERENCE AS A VEHICLE TO ESTABLISH HIMSELF AS A MAJOR CANADIAN SPOKESMAN ON FEDERAL-PROVINCIAL RELATIONS. IT SEEMS CLEAR TO US THAT ALBERTA IS WILLING TO SUPPORT SPECIAL STATUS FOR QUEBEC IN RETURN FOR UNCONTESTED CONTROL OVER ITS NATURAL RESOURCES AND A GREATER VOICE IN THE FORMULATION OF ECONOMIC POLICIES WHICH IMPACT ON THIS PROVINCE. WE BELIEVE THAT LOUGHEED IS SEEKING TO

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REASSERT HIMSELF AS A NATIONAL PC LEADER AND (BY IMPLICATION) A POTENTIAL SUCCESSOR TO TRUDEAU. THE CANADIAN WEST FOUNDATION IS AN INDEPENDENT, NON-PARTISAN ORGANIZATION WHICH SEEKS TO STRENGTHEN THE POSITION OF THE WEST IN CANADIAN CONFEDERATION. IT IS LARGELY SUPPORTED BY PROMINENT WESTERN BUSINESSMEN. COPIES OF THE "ALTERNATIVES CANADA" CONFERENCE BRIEF ARE BEING AIRPOUCHED TO EUR/CAN AND EMBASSY OTTAWA. RATTRAY

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